

24 A A A Alvar Aalto

P



Alvar and Aino Aalto, Villa Mairea, living room with Aino Aalto and Maire Gullichsen, Noormarkku, Finland, 1939.*

Finnish archipelago at the Stockholm Exhibition, the dream of better living through

In 1935, Alvar and Aino Aalto, together with Maire Gullichsen and Nils-Gustav Hahl, had already formed the Artek Company with the intention of selling the line of modern bent wood furniture and fittings the Aaltos had been designing since the late 1920s. The purpose of the company was more than a commercial enterprise; it was, among other objectives, an extension of their mutual interest in promoting social and cultural progress.¹⁶

By means of affordable, well-made things, realized through serial industrial production, the company could, through the quality of the Aalto's furnishings and a limited number of other products, reinforce traditional Finnish values of simplicity and functionality, elevate the aesthetic judgment of Finland's emerging middle class, and advance their society's acceptance of a new modern outlook.¹⁷ By chan-

problems in architecture today ... [Y]ou use this house to work out those things especially, and the solutions you discover in this building can later be applied in

Masterful Coherence

indistinct.³²

Architecture and Landscape

It is at this point, between the vestibule and the sitting area near the hearth, that Aalto situates the principal place of arrival. Passing screens of wooden poles that define the end of the vestibule wall and then encase the open stair to the second floor, the visitor reaches the view of the garden courtyard, the sauna, and the vast forest beyond. From this standpoint, in one of the best-known architectural photographs of the period, Eino Mäkinen captured Maire Gullichsen and Aino Aalto. They are at the edge of the villa's living room looking outward, transfixed, in a scene reminiscent of the archetypal aura of I.K. Inha's nineteenth-century photographs of Finland's forests, or the unsettling solitude that Edward Hopper depicted in his paintings of the time.⁴¹ The focused view, framed by a floor-to-ceiling sliding glass window, is an archetypal image laden with the memories of generations of

making a better life for the common man, are recurring difficulties brought into sharp focus in the villa.⁵¹

Looking forward, Aalto's brilliant resolution to these issues prefigures one of the daunting challenges of the twenty-first century: Being rooted in a specific place, its local economy, and its indigenous traditions, while at the same time being globally intertwined with the larger world and its fluid movement of ideas, forms, and technical innovations.⁵² It is here, in this fertile middle ground, that Aalto created a house with lasting global significance.

Notes

- * Image credit: Eino Mäkinen. Reproduced by permission of Alvar Aalto Museum.
1. "Perhaps the most surprising discovery consisted of the files from the 1920s stored in the attic of the Aalto home on Riihitie. Aalto had systematically suppressed his entire Neo-Classical period after his 'conversion' to Rationalism in 1927." Göran Schildt, introduction to *Alvar Aalto: A Life in Architecture*, ed. Göran Schildt (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), xi.
 2. Alvar Aalto opened his architectural office in Jvaskylä in 1923. Aino Marsio began working in Aalto's office in spring 1924, and they were married later the same year. Aino's role in the work of the Aalto office is difficult to determine precisely, in part due to the fact that it was not until 1929, when the Finnish Marriage Act was passed, that equality between spouses was realized. Nevertheless, a strong collaborative relationship was already established from the beginning of their work together, and both partners often signed drawings. See: Arne Heponauta, "On Aino Marsio-Aalto," in *Alvar Aalto: A Life in Architecture*, ed. Ulla Kinnunen (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, Alvar Aalto Museum, 2004). In the realm of product design, and in certain competitions, the attribution of works by Aino or Alvar is relatively clear. It is difficult, however, to establish an accurate account of the role Aino Marsio-Aalto had in many of the office's architectural projects. This was complicated by the fact that Aino temporarily withdrew from the office in the 1930s when their children were young and by her leading role as Director of Artek, the furnishings firm the Aaltos established with Maire Gullichsen and Nils-Gustav Hahl in 1935. While Aino had a sig-

December 1917, shortly after the Bolshevik takeover in Russia. Civil war erupted in Finland in January 1918. Alvar Aalto left his architectural studies to serve with the Whites, forces predominantly constituted by farmers from rural Finland, in their struggle against the Reds, whose main source of support was the urban working class. The Whites prevailed. As a result of the conflict, which lasted less than five months, nearly 30,000 Finns, about 1% of the country's total population, perished. See "The Finnish Civil War" at <http://countrystudies.us/finland/15.htm>. The division of society and the specter of class-based revolution were therefore very real for Aalto and Marsio's generation. The idea that social reform could be advanced through innovative industrialized processes – an idea that was prevalent among the modern movement's avant-garde – had a profound influence on the epoch. Indeed, without this frame of reference, it would be difficult to understand the social significance of the Aaltos' architecture and product design.

4. Museum of Modern Art, Exhibit #75 March 14 – April 18, 1938, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/437/releases/MOMA_1938_0017_1938-03-14_38314-10.pdf?2010. The exhibit included enlarged photographs, drawings, and models of four of Aalto's buildings including the Paimio Sanatorium, the Viipuri Library, his own house in Helsinki, and the Finnish Pavilion for the Paris 1937 Exposition, as well as 50 pieces of furniture and bent wood experiments, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/437/releases/MOMA_1938_0017_1938-03-14_38314-10.pdf?2010. Aalto was also included in MoMA's first modern architecture exhibit (Exhibit #15 February 9 – March 23, 1932, http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/64/releases/MOMA_1932_0001_1932-01-16.pdf?2010).
5. By the late 1930s, through his association with influential industrialists and leading politicians "Aalto changed from an outspoken opponent of the establishment into an expert deeply entangled with industrial capitalism and national strategies." Pekka Korvenmaa, "Aalto and Finnish Industry," (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 75–6.
6. On content and form, see Alvar Aalto, "The Latest Trends in Architecture" [1928], in [\[Title\]](#), ed. Göran Schildt, (Helsinki: Otava Publishing Company

- preparing competition entries.” Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, “The Silent Central Personage: The Architect Aino Marsio-Aalto,” in Kinnunen, , 213.
9. See Carl Marklund and Peter Stadius, “Acceptance and Conformity: Merging Modernity with Nationalism in the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930,” , 2, no. 35 (2010): 609–34. <http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se/v2/a35/>
 10. As the Finnish delegate to the CIAM in Frankfurt in September 1929, Aalto encountered the vanguard of the modern movement and participated in discussions that would have a profound impact on his development as an architect, both immediately and in the long term. Aalto was elected to CIRPAC, the executive body of CIAM, and travelled to attend its meeting in Berlin in 1931, and later to its third meeting (The Functional City) in Athens in 1933. Aalto’s writing from this period was to a great extent influenced by CIAM ideology: The crisis of housing, standardization, industrialized production, modern materials, functional zoning, daylight, and even biological analogies. In fact, the first sentence of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret’s report of

the undulating acoustic ceiling, curvilinear stacking chairs, and floor of the Viipuri Library'

the factory owners. This requires a fundamental public education in the appreciation of quality, which today has not even begun. What we need," he continues, "is not an emotion-laden furniture and a luxurious art but decent household artifacts for the ordinary man." Hermann Muthesius, *Die Kunst der Bauhaus*, 1st ed. 1902; 2nd ed. 1903,

trans. Stanford Anderson (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 17, 92, 95. The idea that architecture and design could contribute to the ethical and aesthetic enlightenment of a new middle class permeated the ideology of the early modern movement in northern Europe. A principal feature of the theoretical program advanced by the Left Front for the Arts in Russia and its journal *Iskusstvo* (1923–25) "was the view that art offered a vital means of exerting an influence on the psyche of the proletariat, and that this influence could stimulate it to build a new life." Anatole Senkevitch, Jr. introduction to *Art and the Proletariat*, by Mosei Ginzburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 33.

18. The ethical basis of art was also a fundamental tenet of the Bauhaus under Gropius. In the abstract to her insightful essay, "The Ethics of Perception," Eva Diaz writes: "Albers encouraged a reflexive relation between better art production and better social performance ... Better design thus alters habits of perception and can improve society." Eva Diaz, "The Ethics of Perception: Josef Albers in the United States," *Journal of Architecture*, 90, no. 2 (June 2008): 260–85. Through the CIAM, Aalto met Gropius and Bauhaus masters Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy, who taught in the school's Vorkurs or Foundation Curriculum. Moholy-Nagy visited Aalto in Finland in 1931, where he inevitably shared the Bauhaus vision of an improved society through artistic education.
19. Alvar Aalto was chiefly responsible for the Minimum Apartment Exhibit in Helsinki in 1930, and as late as 1932 wrote of a "planned economy in the production of utility housing ... under a management working scientifically, as if in a laboratory." Alvar Aalto, "Hyvä asunto" [A Good Home] [1932], in Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: Aalto's Architecture*, 76.
20. Aalto was encouraged by the clients to experiment, but he was somewhat hesitant to take full advantage of the opportunity. In fact, the clients, upon seeing an early rendering of the house, remarked that it was not ambitious enough. "No, Alvar, you can do better," they told him. Interview with Kristian Gullichsen, "The Villa As an Experiment for Aalto," quoted in Hiroshi Saito, *Alvar Aalto: The Villa Mairea*, 100 (Tokyo: TOTO,

22. Unpublished notes in Aalto Archives. Schildt, *Alvar Aalto*, 226–9.
23. That many of Aino and Alvar Aalto's furnishings designed in the early 1930s remain in use and in production today speaks to the first principles of sustainability – beauty, utility, and durability. Aino's "Bölgeblick" glassware series (1932), which was Gold Medal Winner at the Milan Triennale in 1936, is the longest selling line of glassware sold by the Iittala company. Alvar Aalto's furniture continues to be the financial core of the Artek Company. The laminated birch L-system stackable Stool 60 design (1933), whose prototype, according to legend, was repeatedly thrown across the production floor to test its ability to withstand heavy use, was famously forecast by Aalto to sell in the thousands. By Artek's 80th Anniversary in 2013, more than eight million copies of Stool 60 had been sold. A recent Artek venture, *Artek 1930s*, debuted in 2007, featuring reissued Aalto furnishings complete with patina and provenance. No market research was used to predict the success of either of the objects mentioned above or of any of the dozens of other furnishings the Aaltos created in the 1930s. This is a testament to the belief that simplicity and quality could easily be perceived when presented to the public. For this reason, exhibitions were crucial to the success of early modernism, and the Aaltos were regular participants in exhibits – ranging from pavilions in Paris, Milan, and New York to department stores and shops in Helsinki, London, and Zurich. While many who visited the exhibits could not afford modern housing, many of the furnishings exhibited were affordable to the middle class. By bringing these objects home and interacting with them on a daily basis, the burgeoning middle class could begin to create the foundation for a new aesthetic based on quality and a certain indifference to the fact that they were industrially manufactured.
24. Between 1936 and 1939 Aalto began designing serially produced wooden houses ("A"

then, in my opinion, modern architecture should base itself upon the latter.” Theo Van Doesburg, “The Virtues of Craftsmanship, Architectural Purity and Regional Traditions” 7, no. 7 (March 1930): 145–9, in Theo van Doesburg, *De Stijl* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1990), 102. Another example would be Mosei Ginsburg: “Indeed, modern industrial plants condense within themselves, in an artistic sense, all the most characteristic and potential features of the

synthetically grasped as an overall atmosphere, feeling, mood, or ambience.” He goes on to say, “Peripheral perception is the perceptive mode through which we grasp atmospheres. The importance of the senses of hearing, smell, touch (temperature, moisture, air movement) for the atmospheric perception arises from their essence as non-directional and non embracing experiences. In deep thought,

the family or its guests can sit and remove boots or shoes during inclement weather. The entry to the main hall of the villa is through the thick walls flanking the end of the antechamber. Once inside the entry hall, one must again pass

building was used to level the courtyard and create the gentle hillock which provides it

future. Both are founded on a static, clockwork notion of time (what antiquarians and technocrats have in common). So let's start with the past for a change and discover the unchanging conditions of man." Aldo Van Eyck quoted in Kenneth Frampton, *Architecture: A Living History*, p. 100.

- “The Housing Problem” [1932]. In *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*, edited by Göran Schildt. Helsinki: Otava Publishing Company Ltd., 1997.
- “Rationalism and Man” [1935]. In *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*, edited by Göran Schildt, 47–51. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978.
- “National–International” [1967]. In *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*, edited by Göran Schildt. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978.
- Diaz, Eva. “The Ethics of Perception: Josef Albers in the United States.” *Journal of Architecture* 90, no. 2 (June 2008): 260–85.
- Epstein, Joseph. “The Prince’s Man.” *Architectural Record* (July 27–28, 2013).
- Fowler, Roger, ed. *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Frampton, Kenneth. *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*. New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002.
- Geddes, Robert. *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013.
- Ginzburg, Mosei. *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study* [1924]. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982.
- Gullichsen, Kristian. Foreword to *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*, edited by Kirsi Gullichsen and Ulla Kinnunen. Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Museum, Maire Foundation, 2009.
- Heporauta, Arne. “On Aino Marsio-Aalto.” In *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*, edited by Ulla Kinnunen. Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, Alvar Aalto Museum, 2004.
- Hitchcock, Henry-Russell and Philip Johnson. *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study* [1932]. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1966).
- Huxtable, Ada Louise. “Where They Do It Right.” In *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study* [1972]. New York: Walker & Company, 2008.
- Korvenmaa, Pekka. “Aalto and Finnish Industry.” *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998.
- Manzini, Ezio. “The New Way Of The Future: Small, Local, Open And Connected.” *Journal of Architecture* (2011): 100–5. <https://centres.smu.edu.sg/lien/files/2013/10/Social-Space2011-The-New-Way-of-the-Future-Small-local-open-and-connected-Ezio-Manzini-.pdf>
- Marklund, Carl and Peter Stadius. “Acceptance and Conformity: Merging Modernity with Nationalism In the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930.” *Journal of Architecture* 2, No. 35 (2010): 609–34.
- Muthesius, Hermann. *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study*. London: Routledge, 1993.

- Pelkonen, Eeva-Liisa. *Architecture in the Nordic Region*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Poole, Scott, ed. *Architecture in the South*. Blacksburg: Architecture Edition, 2000.
- Rossi, Aldo. *Architecture of the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981.
- Saito, Hiroshi. *Architecture in Japan*. Tokyo: TOTO, 2005.
- Schildt, Göran. *Architecture in the North*. New York: Rizzoli, 1986.
- _____. *Architecture in the South*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994.
- _____, ed. *Architecture in the North*. Helsinki: Otava Publishing Company Ltd., 1997.